DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 369 500 PS 022 043

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TITLE Bilingual Preschool Programs: Future Directions.
PUB DATE Sep 93
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Applied Linguistics Association of Australia (28th, Adelaide, South Australia, Australia, September 26-29, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Acculturation; *Bilingual Education; Civil Rights; Cultural Awareness; *English (Second Language); Equal Education; Foreign Countries; *Language Attitudes; Preschool Education; Public Opinion; Second Language Learning
IDENTIFIERS *Australia

ABSTRACT

Language policy in Australia has evolved in three phases, with three kinds of argumentation prevailing in public attitudes. In the first phase (1945 to the mid 1970s), maintenance of the first language by non-English-speaking-background (NESB) immigrants was considered a hindrance to assimilation and educational achievement, and thus abandonment of the first language was encouraged. In the second phase (beginning in the mid-1970s), first language maintenance came to be seen as a right, either for protection of cultural identity or for educational equity. Although this view remained controversial, Australia's first bilingual education programs were developed during this phase. In the third phase (late 1980s), bilingual education was seen as beneficial not only to NESB students but also to English-speaking-background (ESB) students, for whom knowledge of a second language was considered economically advantageous. For advocates of bilingual education, this argument has the drawback that it restricts the range of languages supported to those considered advantageous to ESB students. Recommended policy changes are: (1) wider enrollment of ESB students in bilingual programs (also, deliberate inclusion of "third language" students, which, along with first language maintenance, has been found to strengthen bilingual programs); (2) education of parents about bilingualism; (3) improvement of assessment within bilingual programs; (4) greater emphasis in policy justification on the benefits of bilingual education for Australian society as a whole. (ME)

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Bilingual Preschool Programs: Future Directions

Rosemary Milne

Paper presented at the 28th Annual Conference of the Applied Linguistics Association of Australia, University of Adelaide, September 26-29, 1993.

This paper explores some aspects of relationships between changes in language policies and perspectives in Australia, and attitudes and practices in and towards bilingual early childhood programs supporting first language maintenance for non-English speaking background children prior to school entry. It is argued that failure to develop broad societal support for bilingual programs in early childhood care and education can be related to the failure of programs sufficiently to respond to changes in public attitudes and policies. Some changes are proposed.

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Part 1 Changes in Language Policies and Perspectives in Australia

Supporters of bilingual programs, who seek to support the maintenance of the first language while non-English speaking background children acquire English as a second language, have not adapted sufficiently their program claims and justifications for public funding so as to take account of new directions in government policies that both reflect and influence changes in social attitudes in the broad community. Rather than weakening the integrity or the practices of the early childhood bilingual programs, such adjustment of programs so as to reflect, better, changes in language policies and social attitudes, could strengthen the bilingual early childhood programs.

As part of its community services program, the Australian government has funded a number of ethnic sponsored bilingual and bicultural child care centres for approximately twenty years. In addition, State Governments in Victoria and South Australia (and to a lesser degree in some other states), have provided assistance to some bilingual or multilingual

kindergarten or preschool programs , mainly by funding the salaries of bilingual assistants. Both bilingual child care and bilingual kindergarten programs can play a vital role in the continued development of a child's first language while the child is learning English as a second language (Milne & Clarke 1993).

The bilingual child care programs are still being funded by the federal government but it is not expected that any new centres will be funded, despite Lo Bianco's earlier recommendation that bilingual education be increased (Lo Bianco 1987; 1989). With regard to bilingual kindergarten or preschool programs, in South Australia bilingual programs are being increased but programs in Victoria (funded by the State Government) are likely to lose their special funding.

It is of particular importance to increase public awareness of the advantages of supporting the first language maintenance of NESB children in early childhood programs, in the light of constraints on government funding and at a time when the number of bilingual programs in primary schools is decreasing.

in these centres for developing the linguistic skills of the children, both in the mother tongue and in English as a second language.

A few scarce funds had been used to establish some bilingual child care centres but no funds previously had been available to evaluate the effect of these programs, or to assist early childhood organizations to develop policies and models that could provide guidelines for the establishment and development of such programs. The bulk of public funds has gone to supporting Languages Other Than English (LOTE) programs in schools, and bilingual development in the years prior to school entry has been little appreciated.

Australia as a Multicultural and Multilingual Society

Bilingual early childhood programs need to be viewed within the framework of Australia's multicultural society. Australia's post-World War II immigration policies have been by no means flawless but they are remarkable in three dimensions - size, cultural diversity and citizenship (Castles et al 1990 ; Collins 1991). The size of the immigration program has been huge relative to the size of the population. In 1947, Australia had a population of approximately seven and a half million, ninety percent of whom were born in Australia and well over ninety percent of whom spoke English as their mother tongue. The population is now over sixteen million and immigration has been a major factor in this growth

fixed, is usually regarded to have existed in Australia from 1945 until the mid 1970s, alongside a general societal attitude favouring rapid assimilation of immigrants. The first language of NESB immigrants was regarded as an obstacle to learning English and public institutions (including schools and preschools) encouraged the eradication of the first language as quickly as possible.

Minority language maintenance may be seen by the majority not simply as a problem but as a threat. Bilingual education is a symbolic threat to some people in that it is openly acknowledging the legitimacy of non-English languages in public institutions, that is in some schools, kindergartens and community-sponsored child care centres. The acceptance of bilingual early childhood care and education may depend on what the public sees as the goal - either to advance the status of minority groups - low acceptance by the public, or to assimilate minority groups into mainstream society -an acceptable goal (Hakuta 1986:226).

The second phase of Australian language policy, the human rights phase, gained prominence in the mid-1970s when ethnic community groups contested the problem

approach (Lo Bianco 1992:8; Castles et al 1990; Collins 1991). The second, human rights phase of national policy recognized the links between language and culture and argued the equal right of all non-English speaking background Australian children to maintain their first language on the grounds of cultural maintenance and educational equity.

The human rights justification, enshrined in the concept of social justice, was reflected in many federal and state documents which argued that language maintenance was a right. This was coupled with the argument that for all Australian children, from preschool to the final year of secondary school, English and at least one other language should be part of their education (Clyne 1991:238-9). It was during this period that the bilingual early childhood programs were established in Victoria (as were bilingual programs in primary schools) largely due to pressure from ethnic communities.

The human rights argument was not a policy justification that was fully accepted by or popular with all sections of the Australian public. In the press, it has often been ignored or presented cynically

as a guise for government pandering to the migrant vote. Notwithstanding the human rights phase of language policies being the official position, the first-phase view, that of language maintenance being a problem and even a threat, has remained a prominent part of the attitude of many Australians. Policy appears to have leapt ahead of public opinion, seeking to shape social change rather than merely match and reflect social attitudes (Collins 1991).

First language maintenance, is regarded by many Australians as separationist. First phase attitudes are still prominent in Australian society today; and it is not only some English speaking background Australians who view first language maintenance by NESB children as a problem. Recent research has suggested that the view of first language maintenance as a hindrance to learning English, and to educational achievement, is still prevalent amongst NESB parents of children in bilingual child care centres. Many NESB parents who themselves went through primary school in Australia during the 'problem' phase of language policies, remember their social and educational difficulties at school and link these to their own childhood first language maintenance at home. They reflect general

community misinformation about interference of first language maintenance with ESL acquisition (Milne & Clarke 1993) and the importance of literacy in the first language if bilingualisnm is to be an advantage (Wright 1993).

There is strong support in the research literature, regarding first language maintenance in relation to cognitive advantages such as the lack of interrruption to concept development, greater metalinguistic awareness, and greater flexibility of cognitive functioning in general (Cummins 1984; Foley 1991; Goncz & Kodzopeljic 1991; Hakuta 1986; Harmers & Blanc 1989; Romaine 1989; Saunders 1988; Yelland 1991). Misinformation and lack of information leads to some parents, and staff, making decisions on the unexamined assumption that it is enough to develop the first language up to the age of school entry and it is an educational advantage then to drop the first language.

It may be that it is a mistake to mix two claims: the human rights claim for the maintenance of first language on the basis of damage to cultural identity if the language is lost; and the other human rights claim for equity of educational opportunity. The educational

equity claim can be supported more strongly by empirical evidence, which may make it a more persuasive claim. However, though it is clear that linguistic factors are involved in educational disadvantage for minority groups, nevertheless the focus on equality has gone out of fashion, replaced by the third phase of language policy (Lo Bianco 1992:7).

The third phase of language policy, dating from the late 1980s, represents a focus on teaching languages other than English (LOTES) to the whole school community as a resource for the whole community, rather than focussing on the way first language maintenance benefits ethnic individuals or selected groups. This is a justification for bilingual early childhood education supporting the maintenance of the first language of NESB children that may carry more weight in the general community as it is more obviously of potential benefit to the Australian community.

The resource rationale has two interrelated parts: firstly, an increase in the learning of LOTES can strengthen the cultural and intellectual resources of Australia, and secondly (the more obvious and politically more powerful part), an increase in the

learning of LOTES can strengthen the economic and political resources of Australia. By the late 1980s, the recommendation of the report National Policy on Languages (Lo Bianco 1987) that every Australian child learn a second language, was largely accepted by the Government (Baldauf 1993:124).

It might be expected that both third-phase orientations - the cultural and the economic, would lead to further support for the maintenance of their first language in NESB children. However the strength of the second, more powerful rationale, focussing on employment, trade and Australian political influence, has led to a narrowing of language maintenance support rather than a broadening. The official focus has narrowed to only nine languages being selected for 'languages of wider teaching'.

This narrowing of perspective may both reflect and influence what Lo Bianco suggests is the emergence of a fourth phase in the pattern of Australian national language policy: a phase of <u>specific</u> language planning. In this phase the focus has moved from broad support for linguistic diversity in general, to the specific needs of the society at large for individual languages.

Thus the broadening of perspectives apparent in the third phase, now takes a curious twist back to a narrower language policy, but is able to do this in the name of a broader community of interest - the economic and political benefit of all Australians.

Within this climate of narrowed perspectives, bilingual early childhood education prior to school entry is in danger of being caught out on a small limb which might easily be cut off without much community awareness. Any centre connected to particular ethnic communities may be deemed not to match changed Government policy directions, if the ethnic language of the centre is not in the handful selected for 'wider teaching'.

If selected community languages other than English are assessed, valued and their maintenance funded in terms of their contribution to trade and political power, an important principle is in danger: that no language is superior to any other; that all languages are ultimately of equal worth. Although such a principle does not rule out the reality that, in particular circumstances, some languages will be more useful than others, it does indicate a need for great care that, in national language policies, the utilitarian

justification for support does not result in some languages coming to be seen as superior to others. To allow this to happen would be to regress to the first phase of Australian language policy, when English was generally deemed to be superior, and had gathered that superior linguistic status from the same selection criterion Australia is now proposing to use for other languages - that of being the language of a powerful country to which Australia was closely linked in terms of trade, investment, politics and defense.

Part 2 Some Proposed Changes

In the light of the above changes in Australian language policies and attitudes, some issues related to policies and practices in bilingual early childhood programs need to be reviewed, to ensure better and sustained public support as a result of a better match with recent changes in public policies and attitudes. Selection of these issues arises from the recent research report of some bilingual early childhood programs (Milne & Clarke 1993).

1. Wider admission practices

Although bilingual child care programs are expected to follow open admission criteria as set out for all funded early childhood programs, it is also to be expected that the heaviest demand will be from the particular ethnic community supporting the program. This is a strength in that it is this population of children that gives the bilingual program its necessary cultural and linguistic foundation. However, in many programs there has been a failure to seek significant numbers of English speaking background (ESB) children, some groups having only one or two and many having none. This leads to a concurrent failure to project an inclusive rather than a separationist image in the general community.

Many English speaking background (ESB) Australians still have a low level of understanding of the need for their children to learn a second language (Baldauf 1993:126). The opportunity is being ignored to help these English speaking backgrand families to recognize that the bilingual programs can offer their children extremely good second language learning environments, and so to add strong support from these ESB families for the

maintenance of the bilingual programs in tight economic times.

Even more importantly, opportunities are being lost for NESB children to benefit from the English language peer models that ESB children could provide. ESB and NESB peers in bilingual programs can provide each other with natural models of their mother tongue, and a broad variety of models (since all speakers of a language don't speak in the same way and child models speak to children differently from adult models).

Motivation is one of the keys to the success of the Australian Government's policy of second language learning for all children (Baldauf 1993:126). Bilingual early childhood centres with an approach centred on learning through play, can provide second language learning environments with maximum motivation. The environments can stimulate a form of communication that is closely related to children's interests, where children more often have the power to nominate the topic rather than being in an adult dominated language environment as happens later in the school years. Furthermore, peers not only want to know what each other is saying, but also want to be understood by the

other; therefore they help each other understand by suitable adjustments to their language (Dulay, Burt & Krashen 1982).

It is acknowledged that the inclusion of ESB children may pose a threat of the bilingual programs becoming merely 'assimilatory' programs for the language minority children (Wong-Fillmore 1991). However, where ethnic communities are managing these programs (as is usually the case in Victoria and South Australia) the danger of assimilation, with loss of the mother tongue, can be avoided through careful strategies and evaluation in the hands of management. Some Australian bilingual programs have been successful in deliberately seeking a diversity of family language backgrounds, considering it an important element in multicultural education, without weakening their particular language focus in the centre.

A few bilingual child care programs have a policy of enrolling a certain proportion (between thirty and seventy percent) of children who have first language backgrounds other than the main language of the program. These programs represent the exceptions not the general pattern. Where it is done as a deliberate

element in policy, alongside emphasis on first language maintenance for all NESB children, it can add greatly to the strength of the program. Where it is done on an ad hoc basis, often to shore up falling enrollment figures, without special planning, it has been observed to be associated with language environments that are poor in terms of many elements and particularly worrying in terms of the lack of attention paid to the language development of 'third language' children - those speaking a language other than English and other than the main ethnic language of the program (Milne & Clarke 1993).

2. Parent education about bilingualism

The family and cultural advantages of bilingualism are generally understood by NESB parents of children in bilingual child care programs, including the importance for first language maintenance in relation to the upholding of family cohesion and authority. However, many NESB parents do not have the information sources that keep them up to date on research findings about linguistic development in early childhood, including the potential cognitive and educational benefits of bilingualism, the dispelling of the myth that first

language maintenance inevitably interferes with the development of English as a second lamguage after school entry, and the conditions under which bilingualism is likely to become an educational advantage rather than a disadvantage.

When parents are helped to increase their knowledge in relation to the language development of their child who is attending a bilingual program, the benefit can be expected to spread to other children in the family. There is a need for and a dearth of regular, parenting programs in many bilingual child care centres (Milne & Clarke 1993).

The absence of systematic parent education programs in many bilingual centres reflects the general difficulty of establishing parent programs in any child care situations where both parents are working and have little free time. However, imaginative approaches are needed to fill significant gaps in parenting information, particularly about literacy. Parents help establish a child's language development, both directly as models and indirectly as decision makers about early childhood care and education, long before a child enters school.

3. Evaluation and assessment within bilingual programs

In many cases there is a lack of evidence of significant evaluation of bilingual early childhood programs, regularly and with sufficient rigor, and of deliberate and monitored changes to program practices and strategies as a result of such evaluations. Within this general paucity of overall evaluation of the total program, there is also, often, a lack of evidence in many bilingual child care programs of regular and careful assessment of each child's first and second language development (and third language where appropriate), using measuring tools that are linguistically, developmentally and culturally appropriate. Many tools as were seen to be in use were in need of modification or extension (Milne & Clarke 1993).

4. Greater emphasis on justifications for public funding that emphasize early childhood language programs as important contributors to national language resources

There has been a relative failure of supporting communities to broaden the focus of their justification

for public funding of the bilingual early childhood programs so as to emphasize languages maintenance and development in young children as a resource for Australian society as a whole; the emphasis still tends to be on the human rights justification.

The National Policy on Language and Literacy (DEET 1991) emphasizes the importance of language and literacy in the first years of school yet completely ignores consideration of the major influence that experiences in child care and kindergarten programs, as well as the home, can have on children's first and second language development before school entry. Any second language learning program in schools has timetable implications that present major difficulties in relation to the fair spread of time over all school content areas (Baldauf 1993:130). The estimation is that 700 to 900 hours of study are needed for minimum vocational proficiency in a European language and double or triple this amount for character based languages. Baldauf suggests that the solution must be found in joint language and content time allocation, ie bilingual teaching. This is what happens naturally in bilingual child care and kindergarten programs.

Children who have attended bilingual early childhood programs may enter school with a considerable portion of that required time already spent on second language acquisition. At this time of economic restrictions, voices are calling for imaginative ways of using existing resources in dealing with the task of increasing the level of languages learning in Australian children (Baldauf 1993; Clyne 1993a, 1993b). At such a time, the amount of learning possible in early childhood bilingual programs, with little additional program operating expense, needs to be presented more forcibly as a major justification for seeking to maintain and extend bilingual programs in child care and kindergarten centres.

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